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Decoupage—From Hobby to Art

Artist Scott Potter elevates the common collage.

By Jordan Simon • Photos by Jeffrey Stevensen

Deconstructing decoupage (cut-and-paste) has become the choicest home-decorating fad since retiling a backyard pool with cut-up credit cards. Dozens of Martha Stewart wannabes have produced books, videos and Web pages raving that anyone can take scissors, paper patterns, glue, lacquer and items ranging from pill boxes to grand

pianos—and presto, pretty collages!

But Scott Potter of Scott Potter Designs in Portland, Maine, has elevated an exacting, yet basic, craft/hobby to a true, complex art form. Potter's love of classical design stems not only from his keen visual eye, but also from his ballet background; he once was a principal dancer and choreographer for the Portland Ballet.

Dancers are trained in every aspect of production, including design. ("We often even sew our own costumes," Potter notes.) He jumped at the opportunity to create costumes for school outreach programs, which led to designing for the Portland Ballet itself. "I loved the sheer freedom, the imagination," he says. "My favorites, predictably, were the Nijinsky/Diaghilev-type

productions: unitards hand-painted in abstract bold colors, and, naturally, cutting the holes out for the costumes."

Potter was drawn to home decoration by an exhibit of English castle lithographs while touring in New Orleans. Although the form's 17th-century origins were humble, 100 years later decoupage had become all the rage at royal courts. Potter's work is distinguished by its painstaking precision and his philosophy that "decoupage is a kingly art." His exquisite pieces reproduce that rich, noble look for a loyal clientele, which includes Hollywood "royalty" as well as the real thing: the royal families of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Dubai, among others. (He recently fashioned 900 unique wedding gifts for a double royal wedding in London.) "I want people to feel special, like they're treating themselves to a small treasure," he says.

Potter's designs are typified by deep jewel tones and delicate chromatic counterpoints. His still lifes achieve a bril-



If one word could capture the essence of Scott Potter's work it would be "dynamic." His one-of-a-kind creations, inspired by the 18th-century print rooms of English castles, encompass a range of themes from classical myths to contemporary motifs.



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Each decorative piece Potter makes is designed with ornate arrangements of meticulously cut borders, handmade papers and reproductions of early European prints, which are layered behind glass and painstakingly gilded.



liant, three-dimensional chiaroscuro effect and subtle antique feel through the careful juxtaposition of black-and-white prints against the colors and gilt backgrounds. Contrasting multi-layered papers with gold and platinum gives a mere bowl a palatial look. His creations, ornate yet never overwhelming, possess a strong Art Nouveau feel, though he combines various eras, including lush Renaissance and Baroque designs. Patterns are culled from classic imagery: mythological figures such as Apollo and Aphrodite, amphoras (mischievously contrasted with whimsical elements), and magnificent still lifes of fruits, birds and fish. His spring line is Japanese-inspired, in white and yellow flowers with bamboo accents.

Potter works exclusively with excep-

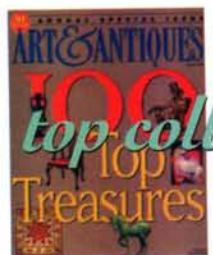
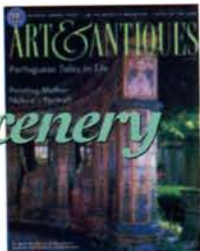
tional reproductions of early European prints and hand-made papers (many marbled in Japan by individual artisans). His studio closet contains reams of textured papers hanging as lovingly as haute couture eveningwear. The papers are meticulously applied to an array of surfaces: glass, crystal, bronze and wood. His creations can vary from vases, urns and plates to serving trays, side tables, crystal compotes and even elaborate screens designed unusually on both sides. A simple six-inch plate can take a half day to complete. Even the shapes—square bowls, octagonals, rectangles, circles—display Potter's enormous versatility. No two pieces are exactly alike; they may use the same pattern and background, but subtly vary the placement. Indeed, salespeople have called him when a tug-of-war

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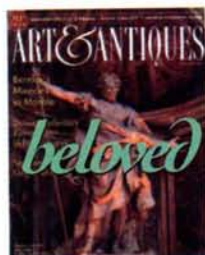
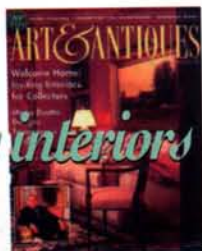
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Assembling such detailed pieces requires patience and rapt concentration. Cut-outs that are soaked in quick-dry adhesive must be placed fast, but accurately—a stressful part of the process, Potter says.

ensued between two clients. (Potter says he often has duplicated a piece to satisfy both customers.) His unique designs are carried by Bergdorf Goodman (where he has his own seventh-floor boutique and is featured in their window displays), Neiman Marcus, Asprey's of London, Waterman in Paris and Boston's 203-year-old Shreve, Crump & Low. But he isn't content to rest on his laurels. "I have to keep reinventing myself to stay fresh," Potter

says. "I want to transcend the boundaries and elements of traditional decoupage, expanding into wallpaper, fabrics and textiles."

Joe Palladino of Shreve, Crump & Low believes passionate artistic restlessness enabled Potter "to rocket to the top of his profession in only four years. He occupies his own rarefied level, justifying the higher prices. Scott's look is immediately identifiable, but never static." □